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How to teach reading has been the subject of much debate over the years. One reason may be because, to the reading public, reading seems to be a fairly easy and natural thing to do. However, this apparent ease masks the very real and complex processes involved in the act of reading.

The truth is that learning to read is anything but natural. In fact, it does not develop incidentally; it requires human intervention and context. While skillful readers look quite natural in their reading, the act of reading is complex and intentional; it requires bringing together a number of complex actions involving the eyes, the brain, and the psychology of the mind (e.g., motivation, interest, past experience) that do not occur naturally.

The two processes described here, phonological awareness and word recognition, are essential to teaching beginning reading to children with diverse learning and curricular needs, such as students with learning disabilities. For these children, as for many children, learning to read is neither natural nor easy. Also, research has made it clear that, for those students who fall behind in reading, opportunities to advance or catch up diminish over time. Therefore, the teaching of beginning reading is of supreme importance and must be purposeful, strategic, and grounded in the methods proven effective by research.

THE SOUND OF WORDS

The "unnatural" act of reading requires a beginning reader to make sense of symbols on a page (i.e., to read words and interpret the meanings of those words). In the case of English, these symbols are actually sequences of letters that represent an alphabetic language, but more important, the printed letters can also be translated into sounds. To translate letters into sounds, a beginning reader should "enter school with a conscious awareness of the sound structure of words and the ability to manipulate sounds in words" (Smith, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1995, p. 2). This is referred to as phonological awareness.
The research is clear and substantial, and the evidence is unequivocal: Students who enter first grade with a wealth of phonological awareness are more successful readers than those who do not.

Some examples of phonological awareness activities include asking a child to respond to the following (Stanovich, 1994):

1. What would be left out if the /k/ sound were taken away from cat?

2. What do you have if you put these sounds together: /s/, /a/, /t/?

3. What is the first sound in rose?

In these activities, students do not see any written words or letters. Instead, they listen and respond entirely on the basis of what they hear.

For some children, performing these activities may be difficult for various reasons. For example, they may not be able to process the sounds or phonemes that comprise a word. Other children simply cannot hear the different sounds in a word, although the problem is not with hearing acuity, but with the nature of phonemes. Phonemes are easily distorted, and the boundaries for determining where one sound ends and the other begins are not entirely clear to the ear and brain.

Phonological awareness activities build on and enhance children's experiences with written language (e.g., print awareness) and spoken language (e.g., playing with words). These activities also set children's readiness and foundation for reading, especially the reading of words. Children who have been immersed in a literacy environment in which words, word games, rhyming, and story reading are plentiful are more likely to understand what reading is all about than those who have experienced an impoverished literacy environment. A beginning reader with successful phonological awareness is ostensibly ready for word recognition activities.

TEACHING TIPS: PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS AND ALPHABETIC UNDERSTANDING

1. Make phonological awareness instruction explicit. Use conspicuous strategies and make phonemes prominent to students by modeling specific sounds and asking students to reproduce the sounds.
2. Ease into the complexities of phonological awareness. Begin with easy words and progress to more difficult ones.

3. Provide support and assistance. The following research-based instructional sequence summarizes the kind of scaffolding beginning readers need: (a) model the sound or the strategy for making the sound; (b) have students use the strategy to produce the sound; (c) repeat steps (a) and (b) using several sounds for each type and level of difficulty; (d) prompt students to use the strategy during guided practice; (e) use steps (a) through (d) to introduce more difficult examples.

4. Develop a sequence and schedule, tailored to each child's needs, for opportunities to apply and develop facility with sounds. Give this schedule top priority among all classroom activities.

READING WORDS

According to Juel (1991), children who are ready to begin reading words have developed the following prerequisite skills. They understand that (a) words can be

spoken or written, (b) print corresponds to speech, and (c) words are composed of phonemes (sounds). (This is phonological awareness.) Beginning readers with these skills are also more likely to gain the understanding that words are composed of individual letters and that these letters correspond to sounds. This "mapping of print to speech" that establishes a clear link between a letter and a sound is referred to as alphabetic understanding.
The research on word recognition is clear and widely accepted, and the general finding is straightforward: Reading comprehension and other higher-order reading activities depend on strong word recognition skills. These skills include phonological decoding. This means that, to read words, a reader must first see a word and then access its meaning in memory (Chard, Simmons & Kameenui, 1995).

But to do this, the reader must do the following:

1. Translate a word into its phonological counterpart, (e.g., the word sat is translated into the individual phonemes (/s/, /a/, and /t/).

2. Remember the correct sequence of sounds.

3. Blend the sounds together.

4. Search his or her memory for a real word that matches the string of sounds (/s/, /a/, and /t/).

Skillful readers do this so automatically and rapidly that it looks like the natural reading of whole words and not the sequential translation of letters into sounds and sounds into words. Mastering the prerequisites for word recognition may be enough for many children to make the link between the written word and its meaning with little guidance. For some children, however, more explicit teaching of word recognition is necessary.

Beginning reading is the solid foundation on which almost all subsequent learning takes place. All children need this foundation, and research has shown the way to building it for students with diverse needs and abilities.

TEACHING TIPS: READING WORDS

1. Develop explicit awareness of the connection between sounds and letters and sounds and words: Teach letter-sound correspondence by presenting the letter and modeling the sound. Model the sounds of the word, then blend the sounds together and say the word.
2. Attend to (a) the sequence in which letter-sound correspondences are taught; (b) the speed with which the student moves from sounding out to blending words to reading connected text; and (c) the size and familiarity of the words.

3. Support learning by modeling new sounds and words, correcting errors promptly and explicitly, and sequencing reading tasks from easy to more difficult.

4. Schedule opportunities to practice and review each task, according to the child's needs, and give them top priority.

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